

Good afternoon,

First I would like to thank you for inviting me and allowing me to be here today.

My name is James Childress and I am a corps member with the Citizens Conservation Corps of West Virginia. Prior to coming to the Corps I was in the wrong crowd. Smoking, drinking, staying out late and at times not even coming home, had me going down a dark path fast. I found myself not wanting to get up in the morning, my home life was stressful, my parents were going through a divorce, my two younger brothers needed someone to look up to and I was not there for them. I had just graduated from high school in Beckley and needed to figure out what I was going to do next. A friend of mine from a local church, knowing my situation and wanting to help me avoid total disaster; suggested I apply for a position with the Corps. I had thought about the military but I was not ready to take that step and I felt I was needed at home. I joined the Corps in June of 2007 and little did I know at that time what an impact it would have on my way of thinking and my future.

I began with the CCCWV working in the New River Gorge National Park. Working in teams of four and sometimes five, under the direction of a crew leader, we planted trees, maintained many trails, resorted historical buildings, and built bridges.

The following year, I was placed on a spray crew. Being on this crew was a new experience for me, but I learned a lot, like about invasive species and the damage they can cause to native species and their habitats. I also learned about pesticides and how to apply them safely.

While I was in high school, it became clear that I did not do my best in a traditional classroom setting- I was a sight learner and I learned best by having people show me. Because everything I do at CCCWV involves hands on or sight learning, and so far I have been able to excel.

Prior to joining the CCCWV, I spent little time outdoors. Now I love nature, and by being in this organization I was able to see places that many young people my age do not see and I understand its importance and I know how to take care of it. Before joining the Corps the only kind of power tool I had ever used was a push mower on my front and back yard. I am now certified to use a chain saw, a pesticide sprayer, a zero-turn commercial grade lawnmower, and other tools. These certifications and all of this experience will make me attractive to future employers.

I have also developed a number of skills that will help me in the work force, such as teamwork, problem solving, personal responsibility, and pride in workmanship. Perhaps most importantly, I've learned a lot more about myself – what I like and want to do, and what I can achieve if I focus and push myself to do it.

I am currently still working for the CCCWV. Through my corps service have I successfully earned an AmeriCorps Education Award to help me pay for higher education, and in the future I hope to use that award to study mechanical engineering.

I have benefitted so much from my experience in working on public land corps projects because I was challenged and exposed to all kinds of new things. And because of this experience I now have a greater respect for the natural beauty in our public lands which will make me a better steward of those lands. I hope that this bill passes so more young people like me can have the same opportunity.

Thank you!